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#### 4. ON THE OCCURRENCE OF THE WILD WATER BUFFALO *BUBALUS ARNEE* IN THE BARAK VALLEY DISTRICTS OF ASSAM

(With one text figure)

The Asiatic wild water buffalo *Bubalus arnee* Kerr (*bubalis* Linn.) is in need of urgent conservation attention. Even stray information of both past and present distribution has become extremely important. An account of its status in northeastern India, the only stronghold of the species in the world, is given in Choudhury (1994). Here I report its past occurrence in the Barak Valley of southern Assam, comprising the districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj (Fig. 1).

There is no mention of the wild buffalo in the literature of this area, except for a remark in Choudhury (1997a). During various field trips for primates and birds in the 1980s, I received a few reports about the occurrence of wild buffalo, but could not verify them. However, it was during a survey of grasslands as part of the Biodiversity Conservation Prioritisation Project (BCPP) in 1997 (Choudhury, 1997b) that I got concrete reports and could personally verify them. While many of the specimens were found to be mis-identifications of the gaur *Bos gaurus*, three horns of *Bubalus arnee* were examined and measured. Subsequently, only the reports of these reliable observers, who did not confuse gaur with buffalo, were accepted. The records are listed chronologically:

**Late 19th Century:** (a) I got reports from Karimganj district (A. Munim Mazumdar, ex-hunter, Hailakandi, *pers. comm.*) about the availability of horns. Two horns were examined, a male and a female, near Badarpur. However, both were shot from Jabda *haor* - Andhari *beel* area (24° 55' N, 92° 30' E) of Katigora, Cachar district, in the latter half of the 19th century by the late Hamidur Raza Choudhury. The specimens were magnificent animals (Table 1). (b) One shot dead in 1885-90 from *beel* no.18 near Hasiura (revenue villages: Rajyeeswarpur pt VII & VIII) (24° 35' N, 92° 37' E) by Kutumia Choudhury, who was among the first settlers in Hasiura. The horn was preserved till 1940s (A. Majid Choudhury, Hasiura village, *pers. comm.*).

TABLE 1  
MEASUREMENTS (IN CM) OF HORNS  
OF WILD WATER BUFFALOES EXAMINED  
IN BARAK VALLEY DISTRICTS

|                                 | Sp-1<br>(f) | Sp-2<br>(m) | Sp-3<br>(m) |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Maximum spread                  | 121.5       | 129.5       | —           |
| Tip to tip (span)               | 91.0        | 61.5        | —           |
| Sweep (across forehead)         | 242.0       | 317.0       | —           |
| Girth at base                   | 32.0        | 50.0        | 44.5        |
| Maximum length of a single horn | 110.0       | 148.0       | 122.0       |

Sp (Specimen)- 1 & 2: Jabda *haor* - Andhari areas, Cachar district; Sp-3: Mahmodpur, Hailakandi district; Sp-3 was only horns without the skull; (m) = Male; (f) = Female.

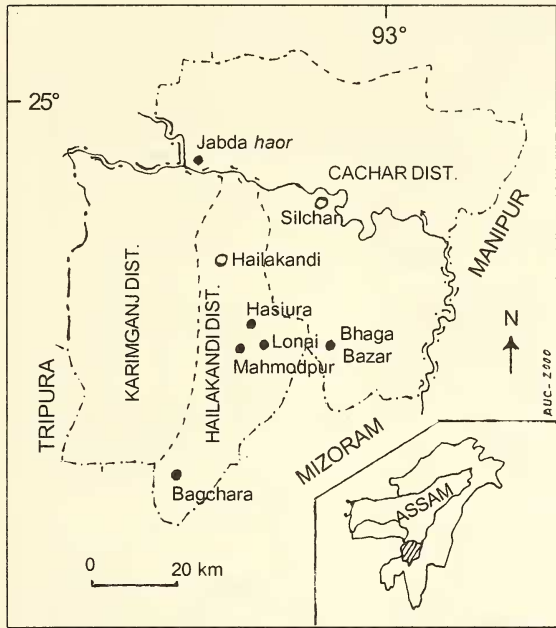


Fig. 1: Map of Barak Valley districts of Assam

**Early 20th Century:** The first authentic report, received during this study, was from Mahmudpur Village (24° 30' N, 92° 37' E) in Hailakandi district (A. Majid Choudhury, Hasiura village, *pers. comm.*). A bull had been shot near Itala *beel* at the turn of the 20th century, and its horns have been well preserved. The measurements of this magnificent specimen are given in Table 1.

**1950:** Two buffaloes were seen wallowing in a small pool, west of Bhaga Bazar (24° 30' N 92° 48' E) in Cachar district (Sharifunnessa Mazumder, 85 yrs, Bhaga village, *pers. comm.*). This old lady had fled her village during the post-partition riots and had taken shelter in the jungle when she saw the animals.

**1950s:** A few were seen till about 1955 in Bagchara (24° 12' N, 92° 30' E) and other areas of Innerline RF, Hailakandi district (Haji A. Haq Laskar, local leader, Nitainagar village, *pers. comm.*).

**1960s:** One bull was seen in mid-1960s at

Kuarthol, near Lonai (24° 30' N, 92° 40' E; outskirts of Katakhal RF, Hailakandi district) (Harun Rashid Laskar, Hasiura village, *pers. comm.*). This was the last confirmed record of the wild buffalo in the Barak Valley districts.

After talking to old hunters and others who gave this invaluable information, I surmised that the wild buffalo existed in the Barak Valley districts till late 1950s. Stray animals were reported till about the late 1960s. No report of any surviving animal has been received after that, indicating its extinction from the area. The last of the animals reported were from Innerline RF of southern Hailakandi and southern Cachar, Katakhal RF of southeastern Hailakandi and in the low hills and valleys of southeastern parts of Karimganj and adjacent areas of Hailakandi. Because of the lack of vast stretches of grassland as are found in the Brahmaputra valley, the animals were possibly never abundant in the area. The buffaloes of Jabda *haor* complex vanished in the early decades of the 20th century.

Expansion of lowland paddy cultivation in the floodplains, poaching for meat and sport (shot at Jabda by a rich landlord, notified by the British regime) and encroachment in the low hills and valleys of the southern forested tract have resulted in the gradual decline of the small population of wild buffalo in the area.

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5. OCCURRENCE OF INDIAN PANGOLIN *MANIS CRASSICAUDATA* IN ALIGARH, UTTAR PRADESH

Neither of the two pangolins reported from the Indian subcontinent are known to occur in Aligarh area. The Indian pangolin *Manis crassicaudata* is reported from peninsular India, while the Chinese pangolin *M. pentadactyla* occurs in northeastern India. Therefore, it was quite surprising that a pangolin was sighted in Aligarh (27° 29' to 28° 11' N and 77° 29' to 28° 39' E) in May 1997. The animal was captured and subsequently killed by the inhabitants of a local village called Barola Jafrabad 3 km from the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) campus. The pangolin was identified as *Manis crassicaudata* from the measurements noted below by the AMU Museology Department where it is now on display.

|                      |                        |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Date of collection   | 15.v.1997              |
| Total length         | 105 cm                 |
| Length of head       | 10.5 cm                |
| Tail                 | 50.5 cm                |
| Forelimb             | 8.5 cm + 5.5 cm (claw) |
| Hindlimb             | 7 cm + 0.75 cm (claw)  |
| <b>Width:</b>        |                        |
| Centre               | 48 cm                  |
| Shoulder             | 47.5 cm                |
| Lower (hind) Portion | 50 cm                  |

I thank Dr. Abdur Raheem, Lecturer, Department of Museology, AMU, for providing detailed measurements.

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6. STRANDED WHALES ON THE GUJARAT COAST

In this note, we report six stranded whales seen between 1983 to 1998. We had personally seen four specimens in Kutch district. There are reports of cetaceans, dolphins, porpoises and whales in the waters of Gujarat. Whales, when seen dead in deep waters, are brought to the coast by inquisitive fishermen, or by the natural force of tides. The reports of such dead whales in the newspapers attract hundreds of people to see these gigantic marine mammals.

It seems that most of the stranded whales seen in Gujarat coast are the blue whales *Balaenoptera musculus*; sometimes sperm whales *Physeter catodon* may also be observed, e.g. specimen No. 6 seen on Jakhau coast.

The cause of death of the whales is not known. Interestingly, three specimens out of the six were seen from February to April and the remaining from July to August.

| S.no. | Place             | Date & year   | Remarks |
|-------|-------------------|---------------|---------|
| 1.    | Asharmata         | April 1983    | 15.24 m |
| 2.    | Sindhrodi         | March 1984    | 15.24 m |
| 3.    | Kalumbhar Island  | August 1988   | 8.38 m* |
| 4.    | Bhadreshwar coast | February 1977 | 13.72 m |
| 5.    | Ganga creek       | July 1997     | 6.10 m  |
| 6.    | Jakhau coast      | July 1998     | 4.27 m  |

\*Blue Whale

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